

## Turkey-Russia partnership in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh: militarised peacebuilding with implications for conflict transformation

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# SWP Comment

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## Turkey–Russia Partnership in the War over Nagorno-Karabakh

**Militarised Peacebuilding with Implications for Conflict Transformation**

*Daria Isachenko*

By siding with Azerbaijan in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey is primarily pursuing the goal of undermining the current status quo of the region. Ankara aims above all to secure a place at the table where a solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be negotiated in the future. The Syrian scenario should serve as an example. Turkey thus wants to negotiate with Russia in the South Caucasus, preferably without Western actors. Ankara's plans are not uninteresting for Moscow. However, because of the complexity of Turkish-Armenian relations, there is a risk that Armenia and Turkey might become the eventual opponents in this conflict, rather than Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU's engagement should not be determined by its tense relationship with Turkey, but rather by the UN Security Council resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh.

'It's time to pay.' With these words, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backed Azerbaijan's demand to Armenia to vacate the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenian troops as well as Nagorno-Karabakh, immediately after the start of the military escalation on September 27, 2020. Later, Erdoğan vehemently criticised the USA, France and Russia who as co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group mediate in the conflict. From the perspective of Azerbaijan and Turkey, this format is neither neutral nor efficient, as no solution has been found for nearly thirty years. Turkey is explicitly on Azerbaijan's side and is prepared to give Baku full support 'both on the field and at the negotiating table'. At the same time, it

has repeatedly stressed its interest in resolving this conflict together with Russia.

However, the first consultations took place on October 9 in Moscow without Ankara. The foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met alone with their Russian counterpart. The day before, President Vladimir Putin had urged both sides to agree to a humanitarian ceasefire. While the ceasefire agreement was not observed, the message to Ankara was admittedly clear: The participants agreed to preserve the negotiating format of the Minsk Group.

On the initiative of the Turkish President, Putin and Erdoğan telephoned on October 14 for the first time after the escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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On this occasion, Putin expressed the hope that ‘Turkey, as a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, will make a constructive contribution to the de-escalation of the conflict’. Ankara’s expectation, however, to play a leading role in overcoming the confrontation is based not only on its role as a member of the Minsk Group but also on its special relations with Moscow. Will co-operation between Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus take place as the Turkish side imagines it?

### Turkey’s Interests

Turkey’s goals in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are twofold: On the one hand, with its support of Azerbaijan, it wants to form a counterweight to the supporters of Armenia. From its perspective, these are the three leaders of the Minsk Group – the USA, France and Russia. On the other hand, Turkey wants to consolidate its status as a regional power by participating in the negotiation process.

The fact that Ankara became Baku’s closest ally can be attributed in large part to the efforts of Azerbaijan. The often-quoted statement in Turkey in reference to Azerbaijan, ‘one nation, two states’, was coined by former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev in the 1990s. After its separation from the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan could count on Turkey’s support not only in integration into international organisations, but also in the establishment of its own armed forces after the first war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The legal framework for Turkey’s involvement in the current conflict is provided by the Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement concluded by Ankara and Baku in 2010. In addition to joint military exercises, the treaty stipulates that the signatories will help each other ‘by all possible means’ in the event of ‘aggression’ by a third party. The impetus for the deepening of cooperation between Ankara and Baku in the military field was provided by similar agreements between Russia and Armenia. Already in 2010, the conclusion

of the partnership agreement between Ankara and Baku was seen as a sign of Azerbaijan’s dissatisfaction with the Minsk Group.

While Baku, with Ankara’s help, is trying to change the status quo in the conflict with Armenia, Turkey’s ambitions go beyond Nagorno-Karabakh. In March 2020, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar declared his country’s claim to a greater say in the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Aegean. According to Akar, under the leadership of Erdoğan, Turkey has become a ‘subject in the international arena’. In the South Caucasus, Erdoğan is also concerned with securing for Turkey the ‘deserved place in the world order’ alongside the USA and Russia.

### Russia’s Zone of Influence at Risk

At first glance, the Turkish commitment on the part of Azerbaijan presents an unexpected challenge for Moscow. On the one hand, Russia considers the entire South Caucasus region as its exclusive zone of influence. The interference of external actors in this region is not acceptable to the Kremlin. This is all the more so since the external actor is a NATO member that intends to establish a military base in Russia’s immediate neighbourhood. On the other hand, Russia is not interested in a deterioration of its relations with all the parties involved: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Armenia is considered a formal ally of Russia through its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In the event of a military conflict that would affect the territory of Armenia, Russia would be obliged to involve the CSTO. For Moscow, this would mean taking Armenia’s side and taking a stand against Azerbaijan and thus also against NATO member Turkey. Abandoning Armenia is not a viable option for Russia either. It is an important participant of Moscow’s integration projects in the South Caucasus. In addition to the CSTO, this includes the Eurasian Economic

Union. Last but not least, Russia also maintains a military base in the Armenian city of Gyumri.

Although Azerbaijan does not participate in Russia's cooperation initiatives, it is considered nevertheless a strategic partner for Moscow. Moreover, for the Kremlin, Azerbaijan is a model of how the multi-vector policy aspired to by many post-Soviet states can function without detriment to Russia. In other words, the post-Soviet states' striving for an independent foreign policy does not necessarily have to end in an anti-Russian position, as is the case in Georgia and Ukraine, for example.

The risk that the current conflict poses to Russia also lies in the destabilisation of the region, with serious consequences for the North Caucasus. The Kremlin is particularly concerned about the presence of foreign mercenaries in the South Caucasus. According to reports, combatants 'from international terrorist organizations fighting in the Middle East, in particular "Jabhat al-Nusra", "Firqat Hamza", "Sultan Murad" and extremist Kurdish groups' have infiltrated the region. Thus the creeping expansion of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan threatens not only Russia's zone of influence but also its own security in the North Caucasus.

### **Prospects for Turkey–Russia Cooperation in the South Caucasus**

With Ankara's efforts to get involved in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation has become difficult for Russia. Nonetheless, Moscow's and Ankara's interests are converging in several areas, which could point to cooperation. For example, Moscow works closely with Ankara in Syria. Both are keen to pursue regional conflict management to the exclusion of Western actors. And last but not least, the Kremlin's relationship with the current government of Armenia under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is problematic.

The reasons why Moscow is being lenient towards Turkey, which after all is interfer-

ing in Russia's zone of influence, were explained by the presumed owner of the private military enterprise Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin. In an interview, Prigozhin criticised Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 as a result of protests. From Russia's perspective, this regime change was the result of a Western-led colour revolution designed to undermine Russia's influence in Armenia. Moscow was in control of the negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia until Pashinyan made a U-turn toward the United States in 2018. As far as Turkey is concerned, it has 'every right to intervene in the Karabakh conflict as long as Armenia's borders are not crossed in the process'. If one follows this interpretation, the decisive question for the Kremlin with regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan is how friendly the respective governments are to Moscow. In order for Russia to be able to preserve its zone of influence in South Caucasus, it needs a government in Yerevan that sees itself as Moscow's protégé. For Putin, loyalty is important not only inside Russia but also in its near abroad. Therefore, the hard power approach of Erdoğan towards Armenia is not without benefits for the Kremlin. Ankara's interference helps Moscow to regain the influence in Armenia that it has lost since 2018. At the same time, however, Russia has drawn a red line to Turkey, namely the Armenian territory.

Furthermore, the Turkish calculation to transfer the Syria scenario to the South Caucasus is not without a certain logic for Russia. It is not only a matter of the quasi-transfer of the Astana format from Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh, but also that cooperation in Syria is too important for both countries to be put at risk. Regardless of the opposing positions, the Syrian factor ties Turkey and Russia together. Moscow's concern is to counter regime change both in Syria and in Russia itself. Turkey, for its part, wants to use the military operations in Syria to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state on its border. Cooperation in Syria thus touches on the most sensitive core issues of both states. It is about their

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survival. And last but not least, Ankara controls the straits that form an important gateway for Russia to Syria.

The results of the Turkey–Russia partnership in Syria can already be observed in Libya. A main feature of this cooperation is the preference for bilateral coordination without Western states. Both Russia and Turkey are on a course of accelerated alienation from the West. Although Turkey is not a ‘strategic ally’ for the Kremlin, it is still a ‘very close partner’. So if Russia is faced with the choice of excluding the United States from local conflicts or strengthening Turkey as a regional power, the latter option would be the lesser evil for the Kremlin. How quickly Moscow and Ankara can reach an agreement in the South Caucasus also depends on how successful Armenia’s mobilisation strategy in the West would be.

## **Hazards of ‘Neo-Ottomanisation’ in the Conflict over Nagorno- Karabakh**

At the present, it is hard to imagine that the Turkish president would travel to Yerevan at the invitation of his Armenian counterpart to watch the World Cup qualifying match of the two national teams together, as was the case in 2008. Today, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan speaks of Turkey’s imperialist ambitions that would reach all the way to Vienna via Syria, Iraq, the Mediterranean and Armenia. The real goal of Turkish expansion in the Caucasus, he says, is ‘the genocide of the Armenians’.

Turkey’s interference in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has undoubtedly brought a new dimension. While Ankara tried to initiate stability platforms in the South Caucasus in both 2000 and 2008, the current effects of a general militarisation of Turkish foreign policy are now also being felt in this region. In Europe there is talk of Turkey no longer as a difficult partner, but as a ‘threatening’ one.

After Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, Nagorno-Karabakh is now also on the way to becoming an internationalised conflict zone where several regional and global rivalries are being fought. However, it is primarily a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is about the contested status of Nagorno-Karabakh. It is also about the seven territories occupied by Armenia, whose area is more than twice as large as Nagorno-Karabakh itself. There have been UN Security Council resolutions on this since the 1990s. The EU should not allow itself to be influenced by the tense relations with Turkey in its possible involvement in the settlement of the conflict, but should orient itself solely to the requirements of international law.

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